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Book Review:

Power and Water in Central Asia

Edward Lemon*

Power and Water in Central Asia by Filippo Menga, 2017, London: Routledge.

During the Soviet Union, Central Asia's water-rich upstream states Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan would provide water to irrigate the downstream states of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In exchange, their resource-rich neighbors supplied them with coal, electricity and oil. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent, sovereign states, this distributive system broke down, creating tensions and disputes over transboundary water resources. Much of the scholarship on water in Central Asia has examined how the distribution of water resources leads to conflict and cooperation, with the more alarmist accounts pointing to the possibility of "water wars." In *Power and Water in Central Asia*, Filippo Menga provides the most comprehensive analysis of water and inter-state relations in Central Asia to date. Menga places state power at the center of his analysis of transboundary water politics, taking as his case studies the Rogun and Kambarata dams, which are currently being constructed by the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan respectively. Where these large dams have become a way for these energy-poor states to gain energy independence and a source of national identity building, in the downstream states, in particular Uzbekistan, they have been viewed as an economic and environmental threat.

Having introduced his case studies and his critical approach to hydropolitics, which recognizes the material and symbolic importance of water to politics, the second chapter discusses the relationship between water and hegemony. He swiftly guides the reader through some of the most important theories of power from Hobbes and Machiavelli to Dahl, Nye and Foucault, settling on a broad definition of power as "the ability, or capacity, of one actor to get the desired outcome through coercive, bargaining and ideational/discursive means" (p.30). Building on this multifaceted approach to power, Menga goes on to outline his approach to "hydro-hegemony," or hegemony over water politics, drawing on the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci and those influenced by him. Finally, the author introduces his theoretical concept, the "circle of hydro-hegemony" (CHH), which includes three dimensions: bargaining power, material power and ideational power.

In Chapter Three, the author discusses international law concerning transboundary watercourses and introduces the hydrological features of Central Asia. He discusses the geography of the region, but also the ways in which the Soviet authorities managed water resources, creating an extensive irrigation structure, which eventually led to the Aral Sea receding. He explores the limited attempts by governments since 1991 to establish an institutional framework for the equitable distribution of water, an era characterized by conflict more than cooperation.

In Chapters Four and Five, Menga discusses his two case studies, the Rogun and Kambarata dams. He outlines the ways in which both governments mobilized financial resources, commissioned studies to prove each project's worth, attempted to gain international support and tied these mega-projects to the construction of national identity. The author frames these practices as counter-hegemonic, constructed in opposition to downstream countries, especially Uzbekistan.

Having outlined these counter-hegemonic projects, the author dedicates the next chapter to a discussion of the "hydro-hegemon" Uzbekistan. He highlights five tactics through which Uzbekistan has maintained hegemony. These include adopting a blocking tactic, seeking international support to prevent the dams being constructed, sponsoring scientific research to highlight the dangers involved in dam construction, resorting to international law, and constructing its own reservoirs to

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reduce dependence on upstream states. A brief conclusion compares the two cases and considers avenues for future research.

The book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of hydropolitics in Central Asia. His exploration of the relationship between nation-building and hydropower is particularly illuminating. Menga relies on an analysis of speeches, reports, laws and statements to chart water politics. While the tables mapping references to water in Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz speeches at the UN General Assembly are useful, the book would have benefitted from a more systematic presentation of how its sources were selected and analyzed.

Menga's approach is state-centric. He examines "how ruling elites and hydraulic bureaucracies, or "hydrocracies," [...] wield power" (p.9). But the state in his narrative is somewhat monolithic. Issues of which agencies or ministries make up this hydrocracy, whether they have taken a unified stance or struggled to forward their own agenda, and the role of the differing political systems in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in shaping discourses on water are all left unexplored. To offer a comprehensive explanation of how power works in Central Asia, addressing these questions is essential. Where attempts to link the Kambarata to the fate of the nation in Kyrgyzstan were inconsistent and limited, in the more authoritarian system in Tajikistan, where president Rahmon's portrait and slogans about Rogun festoon public buildings, this narrative has been more pervasive. The recent reversal of the government of Uzbekistan's opposition to the Rogun and Kambarata dams, following the death of president Islam Karimov in August 2016, indicates that the concentration of power in the hands of the president allowed his personal feelings to shape water policy. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews in the region could have helped Menga address some of these unresolved questions in this otherwise excellent and comprehensive study.

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